

## Burst water pipe, more mold discovered at Board of Equalization HQ

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The state Board of Equalization said Wednesday it is planning to leave the troubled office building it has called home since 1993 after another watery and moldy weekend at its 450 N St. headquarters.

The agency disclosed its plans after yet another water pipe burst at BOE headquarters Sunday, showering hot water down several floors and leading to the discovery of previously hidden mold on the second, third, sixth and seventh floors and in its ground-floor history museum area.

The flood – and discovery of unseen mold on five floors – forced the agency to put 275 employees on paid leave for at least a week, BOE spokeswoman Anita Gore said.

The BOE's flood and mold mishap was only, in the words of its director, its latest "water event."

Six floors – one quarter of the building – are now closed while specialists clear out and decontaminate moldy areas that developed after burst pipes and years of water leaks from defective windows.

The tax collection agency, which has grown over the years, needs office space for 500 staff members immediately. The agency received \$5.7 million in the budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1 to rent new space and move employees.

As part of the space search, the BOE's elected five-member board has directed staff to shop for space that could eventually house all BOE headquarters staff – between 2,700 and 3,000 people.

The state has spent more than \$29 million fixing 450 N St. in recent years because of mold, water intrusions and dangerous windows.

Fifty-seven current and former BOE staff have filed workers' compensation claims, saying the building made them sick, according to a BOE report.

As the problems have multiplied and floors closed, the situation has "caused fear, anxiety and mistrust among BOE staff," the report added.

The BOE report said 164 employees attended focus group sessions last year. In three of those four sessions, 75 percent of BOE workers said they had or were having health problems they blamed on mold. These included asthma, staph infections and rashes, coughing, lung problems, headaches, and difficulty thinking and concentrating. Their symptoms vanished or improved when they left work, they said.

One employee described water pouring through a ceiling "like a fire hydrant." Others described wearing

hard hats and raincoats at work or their fear of carrying mold spores home.

Department of General Services spokesman Eric Lamoureux said the department has responded to every problem in the state-owned building.

"Our own hygienist tells us conditions are not unsafe for people to be in there," Lamoureux said. "We do not believe it's necessary to abandon that building, and BOE has not asked to abandon that building."

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